

# STATION ELEVEN

EMILY ST. JOHN MANDEL

PICADOR

# 1

THE KING STOOD in a pool of blue light, unmoored. This was act 4 of *King Lear*; a winter night at the Elgin Theatre in Toronto. Earlier in the evening, three little girls had played a clapping game onstage as the audience entered, childhood versions of Lear's daughters, and now they'd returned as hallucinations in the mad scene. The king stumbled and reached for them as they flitted here and there in the shadows. His name was Arthur Leander. He was fifty-one years old and there were flowers in his hair.

"Dost thou know me?" the actor playing Gloucester asked.

"I remember thine eyes well enough," Arthur said, distracted by the child version of Cordelia, and this was when it happened. There was a change in his face, he stumbled, he reached for a column but misjudged the distance and struck it hard with the side of his hand.

"Down from the waist they are Centaurs," he said, and not only was this the wrong line but the delivery was wheezy, his voice barely audible. He cradled his hand to his chest like a broken bird. The actor portraying Edgar was watching him closely. It was still possible at that moment that Arthur was acting, but in the first row of the orchestra section a man was rising from his seat. He'd been training to be a paramedic. The man's girlfriend tugged at his sleeve, hissed, "Jeevan! What are you *doing*?" And Jeevan himself wasn't sure at first, the rows behind him murmuring for him to sit. An usher was moving towards him. Snow began to fall over the stage.

"The wren goes to't," Arthur whispered, and Jeevan, who knew the play very well, realized that the actor had skipped back twelve lines. "The wren..."

"Sir," the usher said, "would you please..."

But Arthur Leander was running out of time. He swayed, his eyes unfocused, and it was obvious to Jeevan that he wasn't Lear

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anymore. Jeevan pushed the usher aside and made a dash for the steps leading up to the stage, but a second usher was jogging down the aisle, which forced Jeevan to throw himself at the stage without the benefit of stairs. It was higher than he'd thought and he had to kick the first usher, who'd grasped hold of his sleeve. The snow was plastic, Jeevan noted peripherally, little bits of translucent plastic, clinging to his jacket and brushing against his skin. Edgar and Gloucester were distracted by the commotion, neither of them looking at Arthur, who was leaning on a plywood column, staring vacantly. There were shouts from backstage, two shadows approaching quickly, but Jeevan had reached Arthur by now and he caught the actor as he lost consciousness, eased him gently to the floor. The snow was falling fast around them, shimmering in blue-white light. Arthur wasn't breathing. The two shadows—security men—had stopped a few paces away, presumably catching on by now that Jeevan wasn't a deranged fan. The audience was a clamour of voices, flashes from cell-phone cameras, indistinct exclamations in the dark.

"Jesus Christ," Edgar said. "Oh Jesus." He'd dropped the British accent he'd been using earlier and now sounded as if he were from Alabama, which in fact he was. Gloucester had pulled away the gauze bandage that had covered half his face—by this point in the play his character's eyes had been put out—and seemed frozen in place, his mouth opening and closing like a fish.

Arthur's heart wasn't beating. Jeevan began CPR. Someone shouted an order and the curtain dropped, a *whoosh* of fabric and shadow that removed the audience from the equation and reduced the brilliance of the stage by half. The plastic snow was still falling. The security men had receded. The lights changed, the blues and whites of the snowstorm replaced by a fluorescent glare that seemed yellow by comparison. Jeevan worked silently in the margarine light, glancing sometimes at Arthur's face. Please, he thought, please. Arthur's eyes were closed. There was movement in the curtain, someone batting at the fabric and fumbling for an opening

from the other side, and then an older man in a grey suit was kneeling on the other side of Arthur's chest.

"I'm a cardiologist," he said. "Walter Jacobi." His eyes were magnified by his glasses, and his hair had gone wispy on the top of his head.

"Jeevan Chaudhary," Jeevan said. He wasn't sure how long he'd been here. People were moving around him, but everyone seemed distant and indistinct except Arthur, and now this other man who'd joined them. It was like being in the eye of a storm, Jeevan thought, he and Walter and Arthur here together in the calm. Walter touched the actor's forehead once, gently, like a parent soothing a fevered child.

"They've called an ambulance," Walter said.

The fallen curtain lent an unexpected intimacy to the stage. Jeevan was thinking of the time he'd interviewed Arthur in Los Angeles, years ago now, during his brief career as an entertainment journalist. He was thinking of his girlfriend, Laura, wondering if she was waiting in her front-row seat or if she might've gone out to the lobby. He was thinking, Please start breathing again, please. He was thinking about the way the dropped curtain closed off the fourth wall and turned the stage into a room, albeit a room with cavernous space instead of a ceiling, fathoms of catwalks and lights between which a soul might slip undetected. That's a ridiculous thought, Jeevan told himself. Don't be stupid. But now there was a prickling at the back of his neck, a sense of being watched from above.

"Do you want me to take a turn?" Walter asked. Jeevan understood that the cardiologist felt useless, so he nodded and raised his hands from Arthur's chest and Walter picked up the rhythm.

Not quite a room, Jeevan thought now, looking around the stage. It was too transitory, all those doorways and dark spaces between wings, the missing ceiling. It was more like a terminal, he thought, a train station or an airport, everyone passing quickly through. The ambulance had arrived, a pair of medics approaching through the

absurdly still-falling snow, and then they were upon the fallen actor like crows, a man and a woman in dark uniforms crowding Jeevan aside, the woman so young she could've passed as a teenager. Jeevan rose and stepped back. The column against which Arthur had collapsed was smooth and polished under his fingertips, wood painted to look like stone.

There were stagehands everywhere, actors, nameless functionaries with clipboards. "For god's sake," Jeevan heard one of them say, "can no one stop the goddamn snow?" Regan and Cordelia were holding hands and crying by the curtain, Edgar sitting cross-legged on the floor nearby with his hand over his mouth. Goneril spoke quietly into her cell phone. Fake eyelashes cast shadows over her eyes.

No one looked at Jeevan, and it occurred to him that his role in this performance was done. The medics didn't seem to be succeeding. He wanted to find Laura. She was probably waiting for him in the lobby, upset. She might—this was a distant consideration, but a consideration nonetheless—find his actions admirable.

Someone finally succeeded in turning off the snow, the last few translucencies drifting down. Jeevan was looking for the easiest way to exit the scene when he heard a whimper, and there was a child whom he'd noticed earlier, a small actress, kneeling on the stage beside the next plywood pillar to his left. Jeevan had seen the play four times but never before with children, and he'd thought it an innovative bit of staging. The girl was seven or eight. She kept wiping her eyes in a motion that left streaks of makeup on both her face and the back of her hand.

"Clear," one of the medics said, and the other moved back while he shocked the body.

"Hello," Jeevan said, to the girl. He knelt before her. Why had no one come to take her away from all this? She was watching the medics. He had no experience with children, although he'd always wanted one or two of his own, and wasn't exactly sure how to speak to them.

“Clear,” the medic said, again.

“You don’t want to look at that,” Jeevan said.

“He’s going to die, isn’t he?” She was breathing in little sobs.

“I don’t know.” He wanted to say something reassuring, but he had to concede that it didn’t look good. Arthur was motionless on the stage, shocked twice, Walter holding the man’s wrist and staring grimly into the distance while he waited for a pulse. “What’s your name?”

“Kirsten,” the girl said. “I’m Kirsten Raymonde.” The stage makeup was disconcerting.

“Kirsten,” Jeevan said, “where’s your mom?”

“She doesn’t pick me up till eleven.”

“Call it,” a medic said.

“Who takes care of you when you’re here, then?”

“Tanya’s the wrangler.” The girl was still staring at Arthur. Jeevan moved to block her view.

“Nine fourteen p.m.,” Walter Jacobi said.

“The wrangler?” Jeevan asked.

“That’s what they call her,” she said. “She takes care of me while I’m here.” A man in a suit had emerged from stage right and was speaking urgently with the medics, who were strapping Arthur to a gurney. One of them shrugged and pulled the blanket down to fit an oxygen mask over Arthur’s face. Jeevan realized this charade must be for Arthur’s family, so they wouldn’t be notified of his death via the evening news. He was moved by the decency of it.

Jeevan stood and extended his hand to the sniffling child. “Come on,” he said, “let’s find Tanya. She’s probably looking for you.”

This seemed doubtful. If Tanya were looking for her charge, surely she would have found her by now. He led the little girl into the wings, but the man in the suit had disappeared. The backstage area was chaotic, all sound and movement, shouts to clear the way as Arthur’s procession passed, Walter presiding over the gurney. The parade disappeared down the corridor towards the stage doors and the commotion swelled further in its wake, everyone crying

or talking on their phones or huddled in small groups telling and retelling the story to one another—“So then I look over and he’s falling”—or barking orders or ignoring orders barked by other people.

“All these people,” Jeevan said. He didn’t like crowds very much. “Do you see Tanya?”

“No. I don’t see her anywhere.”

“Well,” Jeevan said, “maybe we should stay in one place and let her find us.” He remembered once having read advice to this effect in a brochure about what to do if you’re lost in the woods. There were a few chairs along the back wall, and he sat down in one. From here he could see the unpainted plywood back of the set. A stage-hand was sweeping up the snow.

“Is Arthur going to be okay?” Kirsten had climbed up on the chair beside him and was clutching the fabric of her dress in both fists.

“Just now,” Jeevan said, “he was doing the thing he loved best in the world.” He was basing this on an interview he’d read a month ago, Arthur talking to *The Globe and Mail*—“I’ve waited all my life to be old enough to play Lear, and there’s nothing I love more than being on stage, the immediacy of it...”—but the words seemed hollow in retrospect. Arthur was primarily a film actor, and who in Hollywood longs to be older?

Kirsten was quiet.

“My point is, if acting was the last thing he ever did,” Jeevan said, “then the last thing he ever did was something that made him happy.”

“Was that the last thing he ever did?”

“I think it was. I’m so sorry.”

The snow was a glimmering pile behind the set now, a little mountain.

“It’s the thing I love most in the world too,” Kirsten said, after some time had passed.

“What is?”

“Acting,” she said, and that was when a young woman with a tear-streaked face emerged from the crowd, arms outstretched. The woman barely glanced at Jeevan as she took Kirsten’s hand. Kirsten looked back once over her shoulder and was gone.

Jeevan rose and walked out onto the stage. No one stopped him. He half-expected to see Laura waiting where he’d left her in front-row centre—how much time had passed?—but when he found his way through the velvet curtains, the audience was gone, ushers sweeping and picking up dropped programs between rows, a forgotten scarf draped over the back of a seat. He made his way out into the red-carpet extravagance of the lobby, careful not to meet the ushers’ eyes, and in the lobby a few remnants of the audience still lingered but Laura wasn’t among them. He called her, but she’d turned off her phone for the performance and apparently hadn’t turned it back on.

“Laura,” he said, to her voice mail, “I’m in the lobby. I don’t know where you are.”

He stood in the doorway of the ladies’ lounge and called out to the attendant, but she replied that the lounge was empty. He circled the lobby once and went to the coat check, where his overcoat was among the last few hanging in the racks. Laura’s blue coat was gone.

Snow was falling on Yonge Street. It startled Jeevan when he left the theatre, this echo of the plastic translucencies that still clung to his jacket from the stage. A half dozen paparazzi had been spending the evening outside the stage door. Arthur wasn’t as famous as he had been, but his pictures still sold, especially now that he was involved in a gladiatorial divorce with a model/actress who’d cheated on him with a director.

Until very recently Jeevan had been a paparazzo himself. He’d hoped to slip past his former colleagues unnoticed, but these were men whose professional skills included an ability to notice people trying to slip past them, and they were upon him all at once.



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“You look good,” one of them said. “Fancy coat you got there.” Jeevan was wearing his peacoat, which wasn’t quite warm enough but had the desired effect of making him look less like his former colleagues, who had a tendency towards puffy jackets and jeans. “Where’ve you been, man?”

“Tending bar,” Jeevan said. “Training to be a paramedic.”

“EMS? For real? You want to scrape drunks off the sidewalk for a living?”

“I want to do something that matters, if that’s what you mean.”

“Yeah, okay. You were inside, weren’t you? What happened?” A few of them were speaking into their phones. “I’m telling you, the man’s dead,” one of them was saying, near Jeevan. “Well, sure, the snow gets in the way of the shot, but look at what I just sent you, his face in that one where they’re loading him into the ambulance—”

“I don’t know what happened,” Jeevan said. “They just dropped the curtain in the middle of the fourth act.” It was partly that he didn’t want to speak with anyone just now, except possibly Laura, and partly that he specifically didn’t want to speak with them. “You saw him taken to the ambulance?”

“Wheeled him out here through the stage doors,” one of the photographers said. He was smoking a cigarette with quick, nervous motions. “Medics, ambulance, the whole nine yards.”

“How’d he look?”

“Honestly? Like a fucking corpse.”

“There’s botox, and then there’s *botox*,” one of them said.

“Was there a statement?” Jeevan asked.

“Some suit came out and talked to us. Exhaustion and, wait for it, dehydration.” Several of them laughed. “Always exhaustion and dehydration with these people, right?”

“You’d think someone would tell them,” the botox man said. “If someone would just find it in their hearts to pull one or two of these actors aside, be like, ‘Listen, buddy, spread the word: you’ve got to imbibe liquids and sleep every so often, okay?’”

“I’m afraid I saw even less than you did,” Jeevan said, and pre-

tended to receive an important call. He walked up Yonge Street with his phone pressed cold to his ear, stepped into a doorway a half block up to dial Laura's number again. Her phone was still off.

If he called a cab he'd be home in a half hour, but he liked being outside in the clear air, away from other people. The snow was falling faster now. He felt extravagantly, guiltily alive. The unfairness of it, his heart pumping faultlessly while somewhere Arthur lay cold and still. He walked north up Yonge Street with his hands deep in the pockets of his coat and snow stinging his face.

Jeevan lived in Cabbagetown, north and east of the theatre. It was the kind of walk he'd have made in his twenties without thinking about it, a few miles of city with red streetcars passing, but he hadn't done the walk in some time. He wasn't sure he'd do it now, but when he turned right on Carlton Street he felt a certain momentum, and this carried him past the first streetcar stop.

He reached Allan Gardens Park, more or less the halfway point, and this was where he found himself blindsided by an unexpected joy. Arthur died, he told himself, you couldn't save him, there's nothing to be happy about. But there was, he was exhilarated, because he'd wondered all his life what his profession should be, and now he was certain, absolutely certain that he wanted to be a paramedic. At moments when other people could only stare, he wanted to be the one to step forward.

He felt an absurd desire to run into the park. It had been rendered foreign by the storm, all snow and shadows, black silhouettes of trees, the underwater shine of a glass greenhouse dome. When he was a boy he'd liked to lie on his back in the yard and watch the snow coming down upon him. Cabbagetown was visible a few blocks ahead, the snow-dimmed lights of Parliament Street. His phone vibrated in his pocket. He stopped to read a text message from Laura: *I had a headache so I went home. Can you pick up milk?*

And here, all momentum left him. He could go no farther. The theatre tickets had been intended as a romantic gesture, a let's-do-something-romantic-because-all-we-do-is-fight, and she'd

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abandoned him there, she'd left him onstage performing CPR on a dead actor and gone home, and now she wanted him to buy milk. Now that he'd stopped walking, Jeevan was cold. His toes were numb. All the magic of the storm had left him, and the happiness he'd felt a moment earlier was fading. The night was dark and filled with movement, snow falling fast and silent, the cars parked on the street swelling into soft outlines of themselves. He was afraid of what he'd say if he went home to Laura. He thought of finding a bar somewhere, but he didn't want to talk to anyone, and when he thought about it, he didn't especially want to be drunk. Just to be alone for a moment, while he decided where to go next. He stepped into the silence of the park.

## 2

THERE WERE FEW PEOPLE LEFT at the Elgin Theatre now. A woman washing costumes in Wardrobe, a man ironing other costumes nearby. An actress—the one who'd played Cordelia—drinking tequila backstage with the assistant stage manager. A young stage-hand, mopping the stage and nodding his head in time to the music on his iPod. In a dressing room, the woman whose job it was to watch the child actresses was trying to console the sobbing little girl who'd been onstage when Arthur died.

Six stragglers had drifted to the bar in the lobby, where a bartender mercifully remained. The stage manager was there, also Edgar and Gloucester, a makeup artist, Goneril, and an executive producer who'd been in the audience. At the moment when Jeevan was wading into the snowdrifts in Allan Gardens, the bartender was pouring a whisky for Goneril. The conversation had turned to informing Arthur's next of kin.

"But who *was* his family?" Goneril was perched on a barstool. Her eyes were red. Without makeup she had a face like marble, the palest and most flawless skin the bartender had ever seen. She seemed much smaller offstage, also much less evil. "Who did he have?"

"He had one son," the makeup artist said. "Tyler."

"How old?"

"Seven or eight?" The makeup artist knew exactly how old Arthur's son was, but didn't want to let on that he read gossip magazines. "I think he maybe lives with his mother in Israel, maybe Jerusalem or Tel Aviv." He knew it was Jerusalem.

"Oh, right, that blond actress," Edgar said. "Elizabeth, wasn't it? Eliza? Something like that."

"Ex-wife number three?" The producer.

"I think the kid's mother was ex-wife number two."

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“Poor kid,” the producer said. “Did Arthur have anyone he was close with?”

This provoked an uncomfortable silence. Arthur had been carrying on an affair with the woman who looked after the child actresses. Everyone present knew about it, except the producer, but none of them knew if the others knew. Gloucester was the one who said the woman’s name.

“Where’s Tanya?”

“Who’s Tanya?” the producer asked.

“One of the kids hasn’t been picked up yet. I think Tanya’s in the kids’ dressing room.” The stage manager had never seen anyone die before. He wanted a cigarette.

“Well,” Goneril said, “who else is there? Tanya, the little boy, all those ex-wives, anyone else? Siblings, parents?”

“Who’s Tanya?” the producer asked again.

“How many ex-wives are we talking about here?” The bartender was polishing a glass.

“He has a brother,” the makeup artist said, “but I can’t remember his name. I just remember him saying he had a younger brother.”

“I think there were maybe three or four,” Goneril said, talking about the ex-wives. “Three?”

“Three.” The makeup artist was blinking away tears. “But I don’t know if the latest divorce has been finalized.”

“So Arthur wasn’t married to anyone at the time of . . . he wasn’t married to anyone tonight?” The producer knew this sounded foolish but he didn’t know how else to phrase it. Arthur Leander had walked into the theatre just a few hours ago, and it was inconceivable that he wouldn’t walk in again tomorrow.

“Three divorces,” Gloucester said. “Can you imagine?” He was recently divorced himself. He was trying to think of the last thing Arthur had said to him. Something about blocking in the second act? He wished he could remember. “Has anyone been informed? Who do we call?”

“I should call his lawyer,” the producer said.

This solution was inarguable, but so depressing that the group drank for several minutes in silence before anyone could bring themselves to speak.

“His *lawyer*,” the bartender said finally. “Christ, what a thing. You die, and they call you *lawyer*.”

“Who else is there?” Goneril asked. “His agent? The seven-year-old? The ex-wives? Tanya?”

“I know, I know,” the bartender said. “It’s just a hell of a thing.” They were silent again. Someone made a comment about the snow coming down hard, and it was, they could see it through the glass doors at the far end of the lobby. From the bar the snow was almost abstract, a film about bad weather on a deserted street.

“Well, here’s to Arthur,” the bartender said.

In the children’s dressing room, Tanya was giving Kirsten a paperweight. “Here,” she said, as she placed it into Kirsten’s hands, “I’m going to keep trying to reach your parents, and you just try to stop crying and look at this pretty thing . . .,” and Kirsten, teary-eyed and breathless, a few days shy of her eighth birthday, gazed at the object and thought it was the most beautiful, the most wonderful, the strangest thing anyone had ever given her. It was a lump of glass with a storm cloud trapped inside.

In the lobby, the people gathered at the bar clinked their glasses together. “To Arthur,” they said. They drank for a few more minutes and then went their separate ways in the storm.

Of all of them there at the bar that night, the bartender was the one who survived the longest. He died three weeks later on the road out of the city.

### 3

JEEVAN WANDERED ALONE IN Allan Gardens. He let the cool light of the greenhouse draw him in like a beacon, snowdrifts halfway to his knees by now, the childhood pleasure of being the first to leave footprints. When he looked in he was soothed by the interior paradise, tropical flowers blurred by fogged glass, palm fronds whose shapes reminded him of a long-ago vacation in Cuba. He would go see his brother, he decided. He wanted very much to tell Frank about the evening, both the awfulness of Arthur's death and the revelation that being a paramedic was the right thing to do with his life. Up until tonight he hadn't been certain. He'd been searching for a profession for so long now. He'd been a bartender, a paparazzo, an entertainment journalist, then a paparazzo again and then once again a bartender, and that was just the past dozen years.

Frank lived in a glass tower on the south edge of the city, overlooking the lake. Jeevan left the park and waited awhile on the sidewalk, jumping up and down for warmth, boarded a streetcar that floated like a ship out of the night and leaned his forehead on the window as it inched along Carlton Street, back the way he had come. The storm was almost a whiteout now, the streetcar moving at a walking pace. His hands ached from compressing Arthur's unwilling heart. The sadness of it, memories of photographing Arthur in Hollywood all those years ago. He was thinking of the little girl, Kirsten Raymonde, bright in her stage makeup; the cardiologist kneeling in his grey suit; the lines of Arthur's face, his last words—"The wren..."—and this made him think of birds, Frank with his binoculars the few times they'd been bird-watching together, Laura's favourite summer dress, which was blue with a storm of yellow parrots, Laura, what would become of them? It was still possible that he might go home later, or that at any moment she might call and apologize. He was almost back where he'd started now, the theatre closed up and darkened a few blocks to the south.

The streetcar stopped just short of Yonge Street, and he saw that a car had spun out in the middle of the tracks, three people pushing while its tires spun in the snow. His phone vibrated again in his pocket, but this time it wasn't Laura.

"Hua," he said. He thought of Hua as his closest friend, though they rarely saw one another. They'd tended bar together for a couple of years just after university while Hua studied for his MCAT and Jeevan tried unsuccessfully to establish himself as a wedding photographer, and then Jeevan had followed another friend to Los Angeles to take pictures of actors while Hua had gone off to medical school. Now Hua worked long hours at Toronto General.

"You been watching the news?" Hua spoke with a peculiar intensity.

"Tonight? No, I had theatre tickets. Actually, you wouldn't believe what happened, I—"

"Wait, listen, I need you to tell me honestly, will it send you into one of your panic attacks if I tell you something really, really bad?"

"I haven't had an anxiety attack in three years. My doctor said that whole thing was just a temporary stress-related situation, you know that."

"Okay, you've heard of the Georgia Flu?"

"Sure," Jeevan said, "you know I try to follow the news." A story had broken the day before about an alarming new flu in the Republic of Georgia, conflicting reports about mortality rates and death tolls. Details had been sketchy. The name the news outlets were going with—the Georgia Flu—had struck Jeevan as disarmingly pretty.

"I've got a patient in the ICU," Hua said. "Sixteen-year-old girl, flew in from Moscow last night, presented with flu symptoms at the ER early this morning." Only now did Jeevan hear the exhaustion in Hua's voice. "It's not looking good for her. Well, by midmorning we've got twelve more patients, same symptoms, turns out they were all on the same flight. They all say they started feeling sick on the plane."

"Relatives? Friends of the first patient?"



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“No relation whatsoever. They all just boarded the same flight out of Moscow.”

“The sixteen-year-old...?”

“I don’t think she’ll make it. So there’s this initial group of patients, the Moscow passengers. Then this afternoon, a new patient comes in. Same symptoms, but this one wasn’t on the flight. This one’s just an employee at the airport.”

“I’m not sure what you’re—”

“A gate agent,” Hua said. “I’m saying his only contact with the other patients was speaking with one of them about where to board the hotel shuttle.”

“Oh,” Jeevan said. “That sounds bad.” The streetcar was still trapped behind the stuck car. “So I guess you’re working late tonight?”

“You remember the SARS epidemic?” Hua asked. “That conversation we had?”

“I remember calling you from Los Angeles when I heard your hospital was quarantined, but I don’t remember what I said.”

“You were freaked out. I had to talk you down.”

“Okay, I guess I do remember that. But look, in my defence, they made it sound pretty—”

“You told me to call you if there was ever a real epidemic.”

“I remember.”

“We’ve admitted over two hundred flu patients since this morning,” Hua said. “A hundred and sixty in the past three hours. Fifteen of them have died. The ER’s full of new cases. We’ve got beds parked in hallways. Health Canada’s about to make an announcement.” It wasn’t only exhaustion, Jeevan realized. Hua was afraid.

Jeevan pulled the bell cord and made his way to the rear door. He found himself glancing at the other passengers. The young woman with groceries, the man in the business suit playing a game on his cell phone, the elderly couple conversing quietly in Hindi. Had any of them come from the airport? He was aware of all of them breathing around him.

“I know how paranoid you can get,” Hua said. “Believe me, you’re the last person I’d call if I thought it was nothing, but—” Jeevan banged the palm of his hand on the door’s glass pane. Who had touched the door before him? The driver glared over his shoulder, but let him out. Jeevan stepped into the storm and the doors swished shut behind him.

“But you don’t think it’s nothing.” Jeevan was walking past the stuck car, wheels still spinning uselessly in the snow. Yonge Street was just ahead.

“I’m certain it isn’t nothing. Listen, I have to get back to work.”

“Hua, you’ve been working with these patients all day?”

“I’m fine, Jeevan, I’ll be fine. I have to go. I’ll call you later.”

Jeevan put the phone in his pocket and walked on through the snow, turned south down Yonge Street towards the lake and the tower where his brother lived. Are you fine, Hua my old friend, or *will* you be fine? He was deeply unsettled. The lights of the Elgin Theatre just ahead. The interior of the theatre was darkened now, the posters still advertising *King Lear*, with Arthur gazing up into blue light with flowers in his hair and the dead Cordelia limp in his arms. Jeevan stood for a while looking at the posters. He walked on slowly, thinking of Hua’s strange call. Yonge Street was all but deserted. He stopped to catch his breath in the doorway of a store that sold suitcases and watched a taxi ease its way slowly down the unploughed street, the storm caught in its headlights, and this vision, snow in lights, transported him back for a moment into the stage-effect storm of the Elgin Theatre. He shook his head to dispel the image of Arthur’s blank stare and moved on in an exhausted daze, through the shadows and orange lights under the Gardiner Expressway to Toronto’s glassy southern edge.

The snowstorm was wilder down on Queens Quay, wind cutting across the lake. Jeevan had finally reached Frank’s building when Hua called again.

“I’ve been thinking about you,” Jeevan said. “Is it really—”

“Listen,” Hua said, “you have to get out of the city.”

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“What? Tonight? What’s going on?”

“I don’t know, Jeevan. That’s the short answer. I don’t know what’s going on. It’s a flu, that much is obvious, but I’ve never seen anything like it. It is so fast. It just seems to spread so quickly—”

“It’s getting worse?”

“The ER’s full,” Hua said, “which is a problem, because at this point half of the ER staff are too sick to work.”

“They got sick from the patients?”

In the lobby of Frank’s building, the night doorman flipped through a newspaper, an abstract painting of grey and red lit up on the wall above and behind him, doorman and painting reflected in streaks on the polished floor.

“It’s the fastest incubation period I’ve ever seen. I just saw a patient, she works as an orderly here at the hospital, on duty when the first patients started coming in this morning. She started feeling sick a few hours into her shift, went home early, her boyfriend drove her back in two hours ago and now she’s on a ventilator. You get exposed to this, you’re sick within hours.”

“You think it’s going to spread outside the hospital...?” Jeevan was having some difficulty keeping his thoughts straight.

“No, I know it’s outside the hospital. It’s a full-on epidemic. If it’s spreading here, it’s spreading through the city, and I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“You’re saying I should—”

“I’m saying you should leave now. Or if you can’t leave, at least stock up on food and stay in your apartment. I have to make some more calls.” He hung up. The night doorman turned a newspaper page. If it had been anyone other than Hua, Jeevan wouldn’t have believed it, but he had never known a man with a greater gift for understatement. If Hua said there was an epidemic, then *epidemic* wasn’t a strong enough word. Jeevan was crushed by a sudden certainty that this was it, that this illness Hua was describing was going to be the divide between a *before* and an *after*, a line drawn through his life.

It occurred to Jeevan that there might not be much time. He turned away from Frank's building and passed the darkened coffee shop on the pier, the tiny harbour filled with snow-laden pleasure boats, into the grocery store on the harbour's other side. He stood just inside for a beat, blinking in the light. Only one or two other customers drifted through the aisles. He felt that he should call someone, but who? Hua was his only close friend. He'd see his brother in a few minutes. His parents were dead, and he couldn't quite bring himself to talk to Laura. He would wait until he got to Frank's, he decided, he'd check the news when he got there, and then he'd go through the contacts on his phone and call everyone he knew.

There was a small television mounted above the film development counter, showing closed-captioned news. Jeevan drifted towards it. Shots of a broadcaster standing outside Toronto General in the snow, white text scrolling past her head. Toronto General and two other local hospitals had been placed under isolation. Health Canada was confirming an outbreak of the Georgia Flu. They weren't releasing numbers at this time, but there had been fatalities and more information would be forthcoming. There were suggestions that Georgian and Russian officials had been somewhat less than transparent about the severity of the crisis there. Officials requested that everyone please try their best to stay calm.

Jeevan's understanding of disaster preparedness was based entirely on action movies, but on the other hand, he'd seen a lot of action movies. He started with water, filled one of the oversized shopping carts with as many cases and bottles as he could fit. There was a moment of doubt on the way to the cash registers, straining against the weight of the cart—was he overreacting?—but he was committed, he'd decided, too late to turn back. The clerk raised an eyebrow.

"I'm parked just outside," Jeevan said. "I'll bring the cart back." The clerk nodded, tired. She was young, early twenties probably, with dark bangs that she kept pushing out of her eyes. He forced

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the impossibly heavy cart outside and half-pushed, half-skidded through the snow at the exit. There was a ramp down into a small parklike arrangement of benches and planters. The cart gained speed on the incline, bogged down in deep snow and slid sideways into a planter.

It was eleven twenty. The supermarket closed in forty minutes. He was imagining how long it would take to bring the cart up to Frank's apartment, to unload it, the time required for explanations and tedious reassurances of sanity before he could return to the grocery store for more supplies. Could there be any harm in leaving the cart here for the moment? There was no one on the street. He called Hua on his way back into the store.

"What's happening now?" Jeevan moved quickly through the store while Hua spoke. Another case of water—Jeevan was under the impression that one can never have too much—and then cans and cans of food, all the tuna and beans and soup on the shelf, pasta, anything that looked like it might last a while. The hospital was full of flu patients and the situation was identical at the other hospitals in the city. The ambulance service was overwhelmed. Thirty-seven patients had died now, including every patient who'd been on the Moscow flight and two ER nurses who'd been on duty when the first patients came in. Jeevan was standing by the cash register again, the clerk scanning his cans and packages. Hua said he'd called his wife and told her to take the kids and leave the city tonight, but not by airplane. The part of the evening that had transpired in the Elgin Theatre seemed like possibly a different lifetime. The clerk was moving very slowly. Jeevan passed her a credit card and she scrutinized it as though she hadn't just seen it five or ten minutes ago.

"Take Laura and your brother," Hua said, "and leave the city tonight."

"I can't leave the city tonight, not with my brother. I can't rent a wheelchair van at this hour."

In response there was only a muffled sound. Hua was coughing.

“Are you sick?” Jeevan was pushing the cart towards the door.

“Good night, Jeevan.” Hua disconnected and Jeevan was alone in the snow. He felt possessed. The next cart was all toilet paper. The cart after that was more canned goods, also frozen meat and Aspirin, garbage bags, bleach, duct tape.

“I work for a charity,” he said to the girl behind the cash register, his third or fourth time through, but she wasn’t paying much attention to him. She kept glancing up at the small television above the film development counter, ringing his items through on autopilot. Jeevan called Laura on his sixth trip through the store, but his call went to voice mail.

“Laura,” he began. “Laura.” He thought it better to speak to her directly and it was already almost eleven fifty, there wasn’t time for this. Filling another cart with food, moving quickly through this bread-and-flower-scented world, this almost-gone place, thinking of Frank in his twenty-second-floor apartment, high up in the snowstorm with his insomnia and his book project, his day-old *New York Times* and his Beethoven. Jeevan wanted desperately to reach him. He decided to call Laura later, changed his mind, and called the home line while he was standing by the checkout counter, trying to avoid making eye contact with the clerk.

“Jeevan, where are you?” Laura sounded slightly accusatory. He handed over his credit card.

“Are you watching the news?”

“Should I be?”

“There’s a flu epidemic, Laura. It’s serious.”

“That thing in Russia or wherever? I knew about that.”

“It’s here now. It’s worse than anyone thought. I’ve just been talking to Hua. You have to leave the city.” He glanced up in time to see the look the checkout girl gave him.

“*Have to?* What? Where are you, Jeevan?” He was signing his name on the slip, struggling with the cart towards the exit, where the order of the store ended and the frenzy of the storm began. It was difficult to steer the cart with one hand. There were already

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five carts parked haphazardly between benches and planters, dusted now with snow.

“Just turn on the news, Laura.”

“You know I don’t like to watch the news before bed. Are you having a panic attack?”

“What? No. I’m going to my brother’s place to make sure he’s okay.”

“Why wouldn’t he be?”

“You’re not even listening. You never listen to me.” Jeevan knew this was a petty thing to say in the face of a probable flu pandemic, but couldn’t resist. He ploughed the cart into the others and dashed back into the store. “I can’t believe you left me at the theatre,” he said. “You just left me at the theatre performing CPR on a dead actor.”

“Jeevan, tell me where you are.”

“I’m in a grocery store.” It was eleven fifty-five. This last cart was all grace items: vegetables, fruit, bags of oranges and lemons, tea, coffee, crackers, salt, preserved cakes. “Look, Laura, I don’t want to argue. This flu’s serious, and it’s fast.”

“What’s fast?”

“This flu, Laura. It’s really fast. Hua told me. It’s spreading so quickly. I think you should get out of the city.” At the last moment, he added a bouquet of daffodils.

“What? Jeevan—”

“You’re healthy enough to get on an airplane,” he said, “and then you’re dead a day later. I’m going to stay with my brother. I think you should pack up now and go to your mother’s place before everyone finds out and the roads get clogged up.”

“Jeevan, I’m concerned. This sounds paranoid to me. I’m sorry I left you at the theatre, I just really had a headache and I—”

“Please turn on the news,” he said. “Or go read it online or something.”

“Jeevan, please tell me where you are, and I’ll—”

“Just do it, Laura, please,” he said, and then he hung up, because

he was at the checkout counter for the last time now and the moment to talk to Laura had passed. He was trying so hard not to think about Hua.

“We’re about to close,” the clerk said.

“This is my last time through,” he told her. “You must think I’m a nut.”

“I’ve seen worse.” He’d scared her, he realized. She’d heard some of his phone calls, and there was the television with its unsettling news.

“Well, just trying to prepare.”

“For what?”

“You never know when something disastrous might happen,” Jeevan said.

“That?” She gestured towards the television. “It’ll be like SARS,” she said. “They made such a big deal about it, then it blew over so fast.” She didn’t sound entirely convinced.

“This isn’t like SARS. You should get out of the city.” He’d only wanted to be truthful, perhaps to help her in some way, but he saw immediately that he’d made a mistake. She was scared, but also she thought he was insane. She stared flatly at him as she rang up the final few items and a moment later he was outside in the snow again, a goateed young man from the produce department locking the doors behind him. Standing outside with seven enormous shopping carts to transport through the snow to his brother’s apartment, soaked in sweat and also freezing, feeling foolish and afraid and a little crazy, Hua at the edge of every thought.

It took the better part of an hour to push the shopping carts one at a time through the snow and across his brother’s lobby and then manoeuvre them into the freight elevator, for unscheduled use of which Jeevan had to bribe the night doorman, and to move them in shifts up to the twenty-second floor. “I’m a survivalist,” Jeevan explained.

“We don’t get too many of those here,” the doorman said.



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“That’s what makes it such a good place for this,” Jeevan said, a little wildly.

“A good place for what?”

“For survivalism.”

“I see,” the doorman said.

Sixty dollars later Jeevan was alone outside his brother’s apartment door, the carts lined up down the corridor. Perhaps, he thought, he should have called ahead from the grocery store. It was one a.m. on a Thursday night, the corridor all closed doors and silence.

“Jeevan,” Frank said, when he came to the door. “An unexpected pleasure.”

“I...” Jeevan didn’t know how to explain himself, so he stepped back and gestured weakly at the carts instead of speaking. Frank manoeuvred his wheelchair forward and peered down the hall.

“I see you went shopping,” Frank said.

## 4

THE ELGIN THEATRE was empty by then, except for a security guard playing Tetris on his phone in the lower lobby and the executive producer, who'd decided to make the dreaded phone call from an office upstairs. He was surprised when Arthur's lawyer answered the phone, since after all it was one a.m., although of course the lawyer was in Los Angeles. Did entertainment lawyers normally work until ten p.m. Pacific? The producer supposed their corner of the legal profession must be unusually competitive. He relayed the message of Arthur's death and left for the night.

The lawyer, who had been a workaholic all his life and had trained himself to subsist on twenty-minute power naps, spent two hours reviewing Arthur Leander's will and then all of Arthur Leander's emails. He had some questions. There were a number of loose ends. He called Arthur's closest friend, whom he'd once met at an awkward dinner party in Hollywood. In the morning, after a number of increasingly irritable telephone exchanges, Arthur's closest friend began calling Arthur's ex-wives.

## 5

MIRANDA WAS ON the south coast of Malaysia when the call came through. She was an executive at a shipping company and had been sent here for a week to observe conditions on the ground, her boss's words.

"On the ground?" she'd asked.

Leon had smiled. His office was next to hers and had an identical view of Central Park. They'd been working together for a long time by then, over ten years, and together they'd survived two corporate reorganizations and a relocation from Toronto to New York. They weren't friends exactly, at least not in the sense of seeing one another outside of the office, but she thought of Leon as her friendliest ally. "You're right, that was an odd choice of words," he'd said. "Conditions on the sea, then."

That was the year when 12 percent of the world's shipping fleet lay at anchor off the coast of Malaysia, container ships laid dormant by an economic collapse. By day, the massive boats were grey-brown shapes along the edge of the sky, indistinct in the haze. Two to six men to a vessel, a skeleton crew walking the empty rooms and corridors, their footsteps echoing.

"It's lonely," one of them told Miranda when she landed on a deck in a company helicopter, along with an interpreter and a local crew chief. The company had a dozen ships at anchor here.

"They can't just relax out there," Leon had said. "The local crew chief's not bad, but I want them to know the company's on top of the situation. I can't help but picture an armada of floating parties."

But the men were serious and reserved and afraid of pirates. She talked to a man who hadn't been ashore in three months.

That evening on the beach below her hotel, Miranda was seized by a loneliness she couldn't explain. She'd thought she knew everything there was to know about this remnant fleet, but she

was unprepared for its beauty. The ships were lit up to prevent collisions in the dark, and when she looked out at them she felt stranded, the blaze of light on the horizon both filled with mystery and impossibly distant, a fairy-tale kingdom. She'd been holding her phone in her hand, expecting a call from a friend, but when the phone began to vibrate she didn't recognize the number that came up on the screen.

"Hello?" Nearby, a couple was conversing in Spanish. She'd been studying the language for the past several months, and understood every third or fourth word.

"Miranda Carroll?" A man's voice, almost familiar and very British.

"Yes, with whom am I speaking?"

"I doubt you'll remember me, but we met briefly some years ago at a party at Cannes. Clark Thompson. Arthur's friend."

"We met again after that," she said. "You came to a dinner party in Los Angeles."

"Yes," he said. "Yes, of course, how could I forget..." Of course he hadn't forgotten, she realized. Clark was being tactful. He cleared his throat. "Miranda," he said, "I'm afraid I'm calling with some rather bad news. Perhaps you should sit down."

She remained standing. "Tell me," she said.

"Miranda, Arthur died of a heart attack last night." The lights over the sea blurred and became a string of overlapping halos. "I'm so sorry. I didn't want you to find out on the news."

"But I just saw him," she heard herself say. "I was in Toronto two weeks ago."

"It's hard to take in." He cleared his throat again. "It's a shock, it's... I've known him since I was eighteen. It seems impossible to me too."

"Please," she said, "what more can you tell me?"

"He actually, well, I hope you won't find it disrespectful if I suggest he may have found this fitting, but he actually died onstage. I'm told it was a massive heart attack in the fourth act of *King Lear*."

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“He just collapsed . . . ?”

“I’m told there were two doctors in the audience, they came up onstage when they realized what was happening and tried to save him, but there was nothing anyone could do. He was declared dead on arrival at the hospital.”

So this is how it ends, she thought, when the call was over, and she was soothed by the banality of it. You get a phone call in a foreign country, and just like that the man with whom you once thought you’d grow old has departed from this earth.

The conversation in Spanish went on in the nearby darkness. The ships still shone on the horizon; there was still no breeze. It was morning in New York City. She imagined Clark hanging up the receiver in his office in Manhattan. This was during the final month of the era when it was possible to press a series of buttons on a telephone and speak with someone on the far side of the earth.

## 6

### AN INCOMPLETE LIST:

No more diving into pools of chlorinated water lit green from below. No more ball games played out under floodlights. No more porch lights with moths fluttering on summer nights. No more trains running under the surface of cities on the dazzling power of the electric third rail. No more cities. No more films, except rarely, except with a generator drowning out half the dialogue, and only then for the first little while until the fuel for the generators ran out, because automobile gas goes stale after two or three years. Aviation gas lasts longer, but it was difficult to come by.

No more screens shining in the half-light as people raise their phones above the crowd to take photographs of concert stages. No more concert stages lit by candy-coloured halogens, no more electronica, punk, electric guitars.

No more pharmaceuticals. No more certainty of surviving a scratch on one's hand, a cut on a finger while chopping vegetables for dinner, a dog bite.

No more flight. No more towns glimpsed from the sky through airplane windows, points of glimmering light; no more looking down from thirty thousand feet and imagining the lives lit up by those lights at that moment. No more airplanes, no more requests to put your tray table in its upright and locked position—but no, this wasn't true, there were still airplanes here and there. They stood dormant on runways and in hangars. They collected snow on their wings. In the cold months, they were ideal for food storage. In summer the ones near orchards were filled with trays of fruit that dehydrated in the heat. Teenagers snuck into them to have sex. Rust blossomed and streaked.

No more countries, all borders unmanned.

No more fire departments, no more police. No more road

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maintenance or garbage pickup. No more spacecraft rising up from Cape Canaveral, from the Baikonur Cosmodrome, from Vandenburg, Plesetsk, Tanegashima, burning paths through the atmosphere into space.

No more Internet. No more social media, no more scrolling through litanies of dreams and nervous hopes and photographs of lunches, cries for help and expressions of contentment and relationship-status updates with heart icons whole or broken, plans to meet up later, pleas, complaints, desires, pictures of babies dressed as bears or peppers for Halloween. No more reading and commenting on the lives of others, and in so doing, feeling slightly less alone in the room. No more avatars.